

COMPOST CLASS: Workshops offered at Marina waste management site

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Let's face it, composting is not the most glamorous thing in the world — it's all about making a pile of waste in the garden.



A compost heap on a frosty morning shows the heat generated that the bacterial action in the compost heap is exothermic. (Courtesy Of Andrew Dunn)

And yet the process of making something useful from grass clippings, vegetable peels and shredded leaves is not only transformative, but vital to the health of the planet.

"Our patch of soil is connected to the rest of the earth," said Sandra Forman, a volunteer who leads composting workshops at the Monterey Regional Waste Management District. "This is how we can heal the earth."

MRWMD is about to offer another series of free composting workshops, just in time for getting your garden ready for spring.

The series starts today with "Basic Composting" starting at 11 a.m. Although the workshop is free, registration is suggested, which can be done at www.mrwmd.org.

Other upcoming sessions are on vermiculture (worm composting) on Feb. 25 and "Back to Back Basics," which will cover both regular composting and worm composting, on March 31.

Residents, educators involved with school gardens, and community garden members are all encouraged to come to the workshops and learn more, according to MRWMD public education coordinator Kimberle Herring.

Forman said that interest in composting is on the rise, as she's seen from the enthusiastic turnouts at the workshops, which can draw as many as 45 participants.

"There's the whole idea of food waste, and much more consciousness and awareness of how much waste there is," she said. "Also, water issues have made people much more aware of the fact that if they improve their soil, it holds the water better."

Composting has a dual benefit to the environment. It's a way of turning kitchen and yard waste into something desirable. This not only keeps those scraps out of the landfill, it also results in a substance that is a boon to the garden.

"It's a really great soil amendment," said Forman, who has taught organic gardening classes at Monterey Peninsula College and older adults programs. "If you have better soil, the better your plants will be, and more able to take up nutrients in the soil."

Compost, unlike chemical fertilizers, will encourage beneficial bacteria and insects that live in the soil. And adding compost over time renews the soil, from the top on down.

Not only does compost add back vital plant nutrients, it also improves the structure of the soil itself, allowing air and water to flow more easily through the earth and get to plant roots. At the same time, the addition of compost also allows the soil to retain water rather than having it run through.

And if you make your own compost it's free, needless to say making it a win-win situation all the way around.

"Good soil is the key to good gardening, and easy gardening," said Forman. "It's less work and less watering" — and with better results.

In the workshop, Forman goes over the basics of making compost and tries to take the mystery out of it. She also lets participants know that it's probably easier to make compost than they might think.

"If you take the materials and layer them, green and brown alternating, with some soil or compost, and water, it will break down by itself," she said.

However, you'll get compost more quickly, and better compost, by putting some effort into the process, Forman notes. A compost heap that is just sitting will become compost eventually, but it could take a few months.

"The great thing about composting is that there's a continuum," she said. "You can be a very active composter, or you can let nature do the work for you."

And although some people prefer to have a bin, rather than a pile in the yard, either way works fine.

MRWMD emphasizes composting as part of its mission to help people on the Monterey Peninsula reduce, recycle and reuse; it also makes available low-cost compost bins and other supplies to anyone living in the communities served by MRWMD, which includes Carmel-by-the-Sea, Del Rey Oaks, Marina, Monterey, Pacific Grove, Pebble Beach, Sand City, and Seaside, as well as the unincorporated areas of Big Sur, Carmel Highlands, Carmel Valley, Castroville, Corral de Tierra, Laguna Seca, Moss Landing, Pebble Beach, San Benancio, and Toro Park.

Cost for a compost bin is \$49 for people in these areas; those living outside these communities can purchase one for \$69.

The other thing that Forman emphasizes in the workshop is how many different items can be composted. Although most people are aware that they can compost grass clippings and potato peels, they may not know that they can also compost coffee grounds, teabags, paper towels, contents of the vacuum cleaner bag, drier lint, fireplace ash and more. More items composted less going to the landfill. Anything that was once a plant can be composted.

For more information on the compost workshops, go to www.mrwmd.org or call 384-5313.

And, adds Forman, "The more things you have composting, the bigger variety of ingredients, the better your compost will be."

If you go

What: Composting classes

When: Today, Basic Composting, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; Feb. 25, Vermiculture (worm composting), 10-11:30 a.m.; March 31, Back to Back Basics, 9:30-11:30 a.m.

Where: Monterey Regional Waste Management District, 14201 Del Monte Blvd., Marina

Cost: Free

RSVP: www.mrwmd.org or 384-5313